

# The Sealers' Shanty

*A Journal of Sealers' Stories*

---

Volume 8

1909

## ‘Robinson Crusoe of Macquarie Island’:

**Bill McKibbin**

When Captain J.K. Davis visited Macquarie Island in the *Nimrod* in May 1909, he was startled to see smoke coming from one of the sealers' huts, since he believed the island to be deserted. The lone inhabitant of the island was a sealer by the name of William McKibbin.

### *A solitary man on the shore*

When Captain John King Davis first sailed the *Nimrod* to Macquarie Island in 1909, he was startled to see smoke coming from a sealers' hut close to Nuggets Point. Davis sent a party to row ashore to investigate. As they rowed ashore, a man and two small dogs walked to the shore to greet the boat.



Sealer William McKibbin, from J.S. Cumpston, *Macquarie Island*.

The man pointed out the best landing place in the heavy surf then helped drag the dinghy ashore. The party in the rowboat invited him aboard the *Nimrod*, but to their astonishment, the man declined the offer. Instead, he sent an invitation to Captain Davis to visit him ashore.

The hermit was Irish-born, William McKibbin, who had served in the Royal Navy for over twenty years. He had come to Macquarie Island aboard the *Jessie Niccol*, but when the schooner was ready to sail, he announced that he would remain on Macquarie Island. He wanted to save enough money from sealing during the winter of 1909 to buy himself a boat when he returned to Hobart. The other sealers could not be persuaded him to leave Macquarie Island with them.

When Davis landed, McKibbin took him to his little hut, which Davis described as:

*'very warm and comfortable and scrupulously clean. It consisted of two rooms, both of which had fires; one of them was used as a workroom and store, the other as a sleeping place.*

*There were mats on the floor and an alarm clock was ticking away on the side table. The lamp was fueled with blubber and the walls were covered with brightly coloured pictures from English and American magazines.*

McKibbin excused himself and visited the second hut, which he used as a store room. He returned and presented the Captain with a large, brown juicy pie and a loaf of crisp bread, straight from the oven. He

apologized that the bread was not better, as he was out of sugar, but boasted that if he had a good supply of sugar, he could back his bread against any bread made aboard the *Nimrod*. Davis thought the pie, made from elephant seal tongues and hearts was 'excellent'.



A sketch of a sealers hut at Lusitania Bay by J. Scott, 1880, Australian Antarctic Division.

Davis later wrote that McKibbin, who was fifty one years old at the time, looked fit and well on his diet of elephant seal and penguins.

McKibbin had been preparing the digesters for another season of work. When the weather became too bad, he used to sit in the hut and make mats. He had a good stock of oil and blubber in the digester house. Davis tried to persuade McKibbin to return to 'civilisation' with him, but McKibbin replied:

*'Why should I? I'm happy enough here, and have all I want. I'm glad to have seen you, though, and hope you get safe home. Good-bye.'*

According to one New Zealand press reporter who visited Macquarie Island in 1910, **McKibbin had lived an adventurous life and at one stage had been involved in the slave trade:**

*'McKibbin is a veteran sailor who has seen service in many parts of the world for many years back, and he tells of a stirring time of it in the Mozambique Channel while engaged in slave traffic there. In 1883 his ship, the Yondine, was wrecked on the Comono Group (French) in that channel, and the crew were cast away for no less than 104 days.*

*'We managed to subsist on wild goats and shellfish' he said; 'but that was absolute luxury compared with this Macquarie Island business'.*

Davis described McKibbin as:

*'a quaint character, and seemed thoroughly to enjoy life on this foggy and wind-swept island'.*

When Davis returned to Macquarie Island on the *Aurora* at the end of 1911, he asked sealer, Otto Bauer what had happened to McKibbin. Bauer told Davis that McKibbin's exile had 'ended safely and happily'.



## References

Cumpston, J.S. 1968, *Macquarie Island*, Australian Antarctic Division, pp 224-6

Davis, J.K, *High Latitude*, Melbourne University Press, p165.

Davis, J.K., *With the Aurora in the Antarctic 1911-1914*, Andrew Melrose, London, pp18-19.

*'Marooned at the Macquaries - privations of oil seekers -Special to the STAR'*, 1910, n.d., clipping supplied by J. Massey, History curator at Southland Museum, Invercargill.

## Further Reading

You can read stories of Davis' second visit to Macquarie Island in:

[Building Wireless Hill – the AAE](#)

[Third Hatch Shipwreck - Clyde.](#)